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Testimony in support of:

SB 841 An Act Concerning the Implementation of a Comprehensive Children’s Mental, Emotional and Behavioral Health Plan

SB 925 An Act Establishing a Home Visitation Program Consortium

Good Afternoon Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban and Members of the Children’s Committee,

My name is Elizabeth Fraser; I am a policy analyst at the Connecticut Association for Human Services. CAHS works to reduce poverty and promote economic success through both policy and program work.

I am here today in support of two bills that speak to the health and well- being of families in Connecticut.

Early experiences matter. For young children, positive early experiences and the presence of “protective relationships” provide pathways to both mental and physical health. However, when adversity and anxiety are a daily part of family life cultivates an atmosphere of stress. Consistent stress can become “toxic” and this is proven to biologically impact the brain development of young children. The good news is that early interventions, especially those focusing on family and the cultivation of positive relationships, can reverse this effect. In tandem, these two bills provide a foundation for systematic change that will lead to stronger families and healthier children.

SB 841 An Act Concerning the Implementation of a Comprehensive Children’s Mental, Emotional and Behavioral Health Plan: *The Connecticut Children’s Behavioral Health Plan*, released in October, 2014 provides a clear and thoughtful roadmap for a statewide, systematic approach to children’s mental health. We are encouraged that this implementation plan comes from a set of core values that speak to the importance of family connection, community capacity building, cultural competences and a trauma informed work force. SB 841 would codify the steps necessary to put the implementation plan into practice. Although this bill provides a strong direction for this work, we respectfully support the additional recommendations submitted by the CT Association for Infant Mental Health and the Early Childhood Alliance. In brief these include:

- To strengthen and expand provisions with the plan that clearly address early childhood, evidence-based, mental health intervention, and treatment.
- Ensure that the mental health treatment for young children is developmentally appropriate and focused the relationship between children and their primary caregivers
- Parent involvement must include screening for and addressing parental challenges
- A continuum of evidence based interventions designed to meet family need
- Finance the expansion of early childhood mental health intervention

To ensure that the needs of our youngest children are intentionally considered, we recommend that **early care professionals**, those that are experts in the field and working with our youngest children, be included in the requisite Advisory Board.

SB 925 An Act Establishing a Home Visitation Program Consortium:

For many of our most- in- need families, home visitation programs provide access to the information, supports and services that enable parents to provide a safe and secure environment for their children. In Connecticut we are fortunate to have a variety of effective home visitation programs including: Child First, Nurturing Families Network, Early Head Start and Family Resource Centers. Although all are designed to foster children’s developmental growth and support parents, they vary in terms of services provided, level of intensity, and duration of intervention. In addition program availability is dependent on locale and not accessible for all families statewide. As we work toward an effective and efficient early childhood system, it makes sense to implement plans that provide for coordinated and accessible system of programs. CAHS strongly supports SB 925 which initiates the implementation of a coordinated system of home visitation programs including:

- Expanding capacity and bringing effective programs to scale
- Providing in- home services for parents with young children who suffer from severe depression
- Providing intensive intervention, including relationship focused intervention, for children experiencing mental, emotional or behavioral health issues.
- Developing common standards and outcomes for programs and a monitoring framework
- Sharing of annual reporting of data
- Establishing a common referral process
- Developing core competencies and shared training opportunities

Early intervention with parental support is essential to the well- being of children and strengthening of families. The Office of Early Childhood and the Department of Children and Families have developed thoughtful and comprehensive plans that outline the steps necessary to move forward with these two initiatives. These plans should move forward towards the intended goal of a coordinated, efficient and effective system of care.